

# Alere®

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## Cherry Juice for Better ZZZs



Have trouble sleeping? Wouldn't it be great if there were a *healthy* drink to help you snooze? Turns out tart cherry juice may be just the ticket, according to a new small study.

A team of researchers from the University of Rochester and the University of Pennsylvania studied the sleep patterns of 15 older adults. Volunteers drank eight ounces of tart cherry juice in the morning and evening for two weeks. They drank a non-cherry juice for another two weeks.

The results, published in the *Journal of Medicinal Food*: Participants got 17 more minutes of shut-eye, on average, while sipping the cherry juice.

Researchers aren't certain why. But they suspect it's cherry juice's high melatonin content. Melatonin is a hormone that regulates sleep.

Getting enough sleep is key to our health. Studies have linked a chronic lack of sleep with an increased risk of medical problems, including high blood pressure, weight gain, depression and type 2 diabetes.

FYI: Cherries also contain high levels of antioxidants and other super-healthy nutrients like vitamin C, betacarotene (vitamin A) and potassium. So it's all-around healthy.

*Sweet dreams!*

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## SMART LIVING with Asthma

Fall 2010



### IN THIS ISSUE:

Should You Get the Flu Shot?

Yoga May Ward Off Asthma

Even a Little Tobacco Hurts

Smokeless Tobacco Is Not Safe

Can Hair Reveal Health Risks?

Cherry Juice for Better ZZZs

## Should You Get the Flu Shot?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that nearly everyone over six months of age get the flu vaccine. Officials say it's especially important for healthcare workers and high-risk populations to get vaccinated, including pregnant women, young children, people 65 and older, and people with chronic conditions like asthma, diabetes and heart and lung disease.

Infants under six months old are at high risk for flu complications. But they're too young to get the vaccine. So anyone who takes care of them should get vaccinated to avoid infecting them.

The flu vaccine is given as a shot or a nose spray. The injection is approved for use in people over six months old. It contains inactivated or killed viruses. It cannot cause the flu. The nasal spray is approved for use in healthy people, 2 to 49, who aren't pregnant. It's made with live, weakened viruses that don't cause the flu.

**Side effects.** Some people who get the shot may develop a low-grade fever and/or redness, soreness and swelling at the injection site. Individuals who get the nasal spray may

develop mild symptoms, including a runny nose, headache, fever, sore throat or cough. Severe reactions are rare. But call your doctor if you develop a high fever, difficulty breathing or other serious symptoms.

Some people should not get the vaccine. Among them: infants under six months old, individuals with a severe allergy to chicken eggs (the flu vaccine is grown in eggs), and those who previously had a bad reaction.

**Dose.** Adults and most children need one dose of the flu vaccine each year. Some children younger than 9 may need two doses. A high-dose flu shot is available for people 65 and older.

The new vaccine protects against three viruses that scientists believe will be most common and are most likely to sicken people this flu season: an H3N2 virus, an influenza B virus and the H1N1 (a.k.a. "swine flu") virus that wreaked havoc last year.

To cut your risk of getting or spreading the flu, the CDC also recommends that you wash your hands a lot and sneeze and cough into a tissue or, at least, into your arm (*not your hand*).



# Yoga May Ward Off Asthma

Yoga may do more than calm your mind and soul. It may also help protect against asthma and other diseases.

Ohio State University researchers studied the effect of yoga on 50 women between the ages of 30 and 65 with different levels of yoga experience. Those labeled “experts” had practiced yoga once or twice a week for at least two years. Those tagged “novices” had participated in only six to 12 sessions.

The findings, published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*: The “experts” had lower levels of inflammation in their bodies than the “novices” after completing a series of stressful tasks, including dipping their feet in icy water and doing tricky mental math problems.

Inflammation is an immune response. It can help when your body is fighting an infection. But chronic inflammation causes wear and tear on your body – and may play a role in certain conditions, including asthma, cardiovascular disease and depression.

The two yoga groups were very similar in age, physical fitness level and amount of body fat. This is key, because all of these factors – like stress – are known to affect inflammation.

During the study, researchers took blood samples to check for inflammation markers, including a protein called IL-6. They found that the novices’ IL-6 levels were 41 percent higher than those of the yoga experts after the stress tests.



Researchers aren’t sure why yoga helps. But they credit its soothing brew of exercise, meditation and deep breathing. *Namaste.*

# Smoke Out: Even a Little Tobacco Hurts

Need another excuse to stop smoking? Try this: New research shows that secondhand smoke is even more harmful than previously believed. So is lighting up only occasionally.



Researchers tested 121 people for levels of nicotine and cotinine in urine samples. These chemicals are markers of cigarette smoke in the body. Participants were divided into three groups: nonsmokers, active smokers and low-exposure smokers. Low exposure smokers are those who smoke infrequently and/or are exposed to secondhand smoke lingering in the air.

The scientists found that even trace amounts of these chemicals cause damage to cells lining our airways. This damage significantly raises the risk of lung diseases like cancer, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and asthma. It can also make people who already have lung problems sicker, according to the study published in the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care*.

“This means that no level of smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke is safe,” said lead researcher Ronald Crystal, head of pulmonary and critical care medicine at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell.

Secondhand smoke contains hundreds of poisonous chemicals. More than 40 of them are known to cause cancer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC estimates that secondhand smoke affects 126 million nonsmokers in homes, vehicles, workplaces and public areas in the U.S.

Previous studies have linked secondhand smoke to a greater risk of developing serious chronic conditions, including COPD, asthma, diabetes, cancer, respiratory infections, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, strokes and heart attacks.

# Warning: Smokeless Tobacco Is Not Safe

Don’t use smokeless tobacco products, warns the American Heart Association (AHA). They increase your risk of fatal heart attacks and strokes as well as of some cancers. Plus they’re addictive, according to the AHA.

Are you using snuff or chewing tobacco to try to stop smoking? Forget it. Smokeless tobacco products don’t work. And they increase your chance of relapse if you’ve already quit smoking, the AHA says in a policy statement published online in the journal *Circulation*.

The bottom line, according to the AHA: “No tobacco product is safe to consume.”

Smokeless tobacco products have gained popularity in the U.S. as smoking bans take effect. But a recent study found that smoking

rates don’t drop among people who use them. This sparked concern that smokers may use cigarettes and smokeless products.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), smokeless tobacco contains hundreds of poisonous chemicals, including more than two dozen known to cause cancer.

It increases the risk of mouth and pancreatic cancer. And it has also been linked to gum disease and tooth decay, and, in men, to reduced sperm count and abnormal sperm cells.

The AHA estimates that about 7 percent of adults, 8 percent of high school students and nearly 3 percent of middle school students in the U.S. now use smokeless tobacco products.

# Can Hair Reveal Health Risks?

Stress is a part of everyday life. Think bills, traffic, juggling kids and work.... Like most things, a little bit won’t hurt you. And, in some cases, it’s even helpful. Our body’s “fight and flight” response is designed to protect us when we’re in danger. And that’s just what sudden spikes of cortisol do in our bodies.

But it’s not healthy if cortisol levels are always high. Cortisol is a so-called stress hormone. Our bodies produce more of it when we’re worried. That means if we’re stressed a lot, our cortisol levels are high a lot.

Over the long term, elevated cortisol levels can hike blood pressure, blood sugar, body fat and blood clotting. These are risk factors for heart attacks and other medical problems. Previous studies have linked chronic stress to an increased risk for cardiovascular and other diseases. And stress can trigger asthma attacks and make them worse. But there was no scientific way to measure stress over time.

Scientists traditionally have measured stress by the amount of cortisol in blood, urine or saliva samples. But that only shows levels at the time

of the tests. Now researchers have developed a way to gauge long-term stress by measuring cortisol in the hair. This works because cortisol builds up in the hair shaft, according to the study that appeared online in the journal *Stress*.

For the study, Canadian scientists measured cortisol levels in 3-centimeter-long hair strands from 56 men in the hospital. Some of the patients had suffered heart attacks; others were hospitalized for different reasons.

The findings: hair from the heart attack patients contained higher levels of cortisol. The researchers estimate that hair grows about a centimeter (just under half an inch) a month. So they could measure patients’ cortisol or stress levels over about three months.

The researchers considered many heart attack risk factors. But they found that cortisol in the hair was the strongest heart attack predictor, according to the study. The message? Relax. *Your health could depend on it!*

